

Whittier Theatre
11602-11612 East Whittier Boulevard
(southeast corner of Whittier Boulevard,
Hadley Street and Gretna Avenue).
Whittier, Los Angeles County,
California

HABS No. CA-2291

HABS
CAL,
19-WHIT,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WHITTIER THEATRE HABS No. CA-2291

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Location: 11602 - 11612 East Whittier Boulevard
(southeast corner of Whittier
Boulevard, Hadley Street, and Gretna
Avenue). Whittier, Los Angeles
County, California

U.S.G.S. Whittier Quadrangle (7.5)
Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 11.402775.3760540

Present Owner: Doerken Properties, Inc.
3250 Ocean Park Boulevard
Suite 385
Santa Monica, CA 90405

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: Slated for demolition

Statement of
Significance:

The Whittier Theatre was the largest and most elaborate movie theater complex in Whittier. It was significant as an example of a local architect's interpretation both of the prevailing trend toward grand-scale movie palace construction and of the enormous popularity of the Spanish colonial architectural style in Southern California in the early 20th century. It was one of few motion picture theaters to have incorporated "atmospheric" effects in the auditorium lighting to simulate sunset, moving clouds, and a starlit sky. Its tower was a local landmark, visible even from the Interstate 605 freeway, more than a mile to the west. For decades, the theater and its adjacent shops were part of the cultural life not only of Whittier but of the adjoining local communities as well. Throughout its history, the theater reflected national trends in family entertainment. Built during the era of the transition from vaudeville and silent films to "talkies," the theater experienced its golden years in the

decades of the 1930s and 1940s,
declining with the growing popularity
of television and video rentals.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: The January 4, 1929 edition of the Southwest Builder and Contractor states that work on the Whittier Theatre complex was slated to have begun on January 2, 1929. The Whittier Daily News for August 1, 1929, gave extensive coverage of the gala opening held the previous evening, July 31, 1929.

2. Architect: The Whittier Theatre and shops complex was designed by David S. Bushnell (c. 1892-1956), a local Whittier city engineer and architect. Bushnell's obituary appeared in the February 1957 Monthly Bulletin of the Michigan Society of Architects.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The theater complex was built on a portion of the former McNeese Ranch, very near the McNeese ranch house, which lay south of Whittier Boulevard, bordered on the east by a railroad yard and on the west by Broadway Road [Cotton/Beland/Associates, Draft 1988]. It is not clear what the exact relationship between Ralph McNeese, the original owner of the property, and the theater may have been. The January 4, 1929 Southwest Builder and Contractor names the Whittier Amusement Co. as owner. During its first few months of operation, the theater was called the McNeese Theatre, but city directories show that, by 1930, the theater was operated by Bruen's. Pacific Theaters acquired the property in October 1969, and Doerken Properties acquired the complex July 1, 1987.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Work was commissioned by Henry J. Siler, operator, for owner Ralph McNeese. David S. Bushnell designed the theater complex. Earl Montford Wheatland (1873-1946), of Wheatland Construction Company, Whittier, was the contractor for the Whittier Amusement Company. Bushnell's original plans mention two other sub-contractors or suppliers: J.D. Martin Studios (who provided the backstage counterweight system for the flies, and the footlights) and Electrical Research Products, Inc. (who supplied the backstage electrical box).

[Paradiso, Whittier Theatre Conceptual Study, cited in Cotton/Beland/Associates Draft EIR, October 1988; Southwest Builder and Contractor; Bushnell plans, Sheet 9].

5. Original plans and construction: Bushnell's plans for the theater and shops complex were located at the offices of Pacific Theaters. Judging from the numerous plans and elevations in that collection, the Whittier Theatre and shops complex as built was basically as it was originally conceived by Bushnell. The overall configuration of shop arcades flanking a central patio leading back to the theater building with its prominent tower was essentially the same. Roof lines, structural elements, and decorative detail were relatively intact, although there had been alterations both inside and outside.

The earliest "view" of the building is Bushnell's 1928 rendering of the front (Whittier Boulevard) elevation. A print of the original drawing is housed at the Whittier Museum, as are a few photos of the exterior, including aerial views. The Southwest Builder and Contractor published brief but detailed descriptions of the projected construction of the building, including the original construction budget of \$160,000. The local newspaper, the Whittier Daily News, ran articles about the planned complex and about the premiere. Sanborn Fire Insurance company maps updated to September 1937 show the overall plan of the theater and adjacent shops. [See Appendix and Bibliography.]

6. Alterations and additions: The major differences between the theater as designed by Bushnell and the theater as first built were most noticeable in the tower and signage. Bushnell envisioned a horizontal sign, bearing the name of the theater, along the roof crest, and planned to have the tower surmounted either by a spire or a large lighted globe beacon. The earliest aerial views, c. 1929, are indistinct, but they do not seem to show either of these features. By 1940, a vertical sign reading "Whittier Theatre" was attached with struts to the tower wall. An aerial photo dated c. 1940 shows that the courtyard did not conform to the original design. There is a central fountain, as planned, but rather than being surrounded by small plots of grass there was a checkerboard-like pattern of colored

pavement. A flagpole had been added directly in front of the fountain, near the sidewalk.

Extensive modifications to the interior were proposed in the late 1940s, only a few of which seem to have been carried out. The principal goals of the remodeling plans were to expand seating capacity; add restrooms; renovate the ventilation, heating, and air-conditioning systems; and install a snack bar in the foyer. Several alternatives were proposed; unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to state with any degree of certainty which alternative, if any, was adopted. For reasons explained more thoroughly in Section II-A-2 below, a detailed inspection of the theater and shops while intact could not be made. Photographs provide some documentation, and it is certainly likely that an exhaustive search through the Whittier Daily News would supply even more information. The remodeling plans were drawn up in January of 1947 by architect S. Charles Lee, presumably for Bruen, and in March and May of 1947 by B.F. Shearer Company of Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Lee evidently was responsible for the architectural and interior design aspects of the proposed remodeling; Shearer's plans deal with the technical aspects of the new air-conditioning plant. By the early 1950s, a photograph shows that a large neon marquee had been installed across the front of the courtyard, along Whittier Boulevard. Awnings had also been hung over the arched doorways of many of the shops. In January 1959, new plans were drawn up by B.F. Shearer Company for remodeling the seating in the rear portion of the theater auditorium. Again, it is unclear whether the proposed changes were made. Two sheets of plans, undated and unlabeled, with sketches of alternatives for remodeling the foyer bathrooms, probably represent the most recent renovation. The plans most likely date to the 1970s or later, as they include modifications for access for the physically handicapped. The bathrooms are shown in their original location, in the northeast corner of the theater lobby. The edge of what appears to be the recent snack bar is shown to one side.

B. Historical Context

The Whittier Theatre was not Whittier's first movie house, but it was its most prominent one. At least three other motion picture theaters preceded the Whittier Theatre: the Family Theatre (124 S. Greenleaf Avenue) and the Optic (111 S. Greenleaf Avenue) were both operated by the G.H. Keipp family sometime after 1900, probably in the 1910s [Whittier Daily News, n.d., c. 1910s; the Scenic Theatre was in business at 211 E. Philadelphia when the Whittier Theatre opened its doors in the summer of 1929. When the Whittier Theatre was being planned, the owners deliberately selected a site "on the outskirts of town to escape the Whittier blue laws that would have prohibited showing movies on Sunday" [Tribune/News December 13, 1987]. The Whittier Theatre was designed as a combination movie palace and stage theater, and it is noteworthy that the premiere gala included not only the screening of Monte Blue's From Headquarters but "three special vaudeville numbers."

The relative isolation of the theater from the main commercial district of uptown Whittier seems to have had an adverse effect on the complex's businesses for several years. Although the two principal adjacent businesses (the McNees Cafe and the Whittier Pharmacy) were stable, city directories indicate that, up until about 1936, other businesses came and went, and there were several vacancies. The heyday of the Whittier Theatre lasted from the late 1930s until the 1950s, when television began making inroads on movie-going. Excerpts from newspaper articles make it clear that the theater is fondly remembered by many of the area's residents as a popular social focal point and an important part of their younger years.

From about 1967, the entire theater complex seems to have begun a steady decline. City directories show that "discount" and "budget" shops had begun to locate in the complex itself and nearby along Whittier Boulevard. In 1969, one of the two commercial anchors of the building changed hands (the Betty Matthews Dress Shop, on site since 1939). The second anchor (the Whittier Drug Store) was swallowed up in the expansion of the budget shop.

In an attempt to garner more box-office business, the new owners, Pacific Theaters, tried several

strategies, none of which proved successful. First-run movies were no longer being screened at the Whittier Theatre, and the new policy was to offer double bills at bargain rates. In the summer of 1986 the management switched to first-run Spanish-language films, hoping to attract an audience from the large local Hispanic population, but the experiment ended in failure. By November 1986 the theater had reverted to showing three English-language movies for the cut-rate price of \$1.00. In its latter years, the more mainstream shops such as dress shops and pharmacies and furniture stores were replaced by marginal businesses such as karate studios and a martial arts supply shop. The October 1, 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake severely damaged the theater and shops, and the City of Whittier issued a demolition permit, bringing the complex's long career to a close.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The Whittier Theatre was a respectable but not masterful example of a building type, "a theater combined with a forecourt of retail stores" that "came into being in California in the mid-1920s" [Gebhard and Winter 1985:288]. It was certainly one of the largest and most elaborate public buildings in the city of Whittier, although it was far from being one of the oldest as there are still several late 19th-century and turn-of-the-century buildings that have survived. The theater complex was a classic example of the Spanish eclectic architectural style, incorporating such hallmark elements as tile roofs, ornamental tile work and ironwork, balconies, a courtyard with fountain, window grilles, arched doorways, and a tower. (Architectural historians Virginia and Lee McAlester note that the Spanish eclectic style "reached its apex during the 1920s and early 1930s and passed rapidly from favor during the 1940s" [McAlester and McAlester 1989]).

The interior of the theater was meant to evoke the courtyard of a Spanish hacienda, with stuccoed walls, ornamental tile and ironwork, balconies, and tile roof projections from the auditorium's side walls.

Although a Whittier Daily News article of November 15, 1928 touted the proposed building as "the last word in theater construction" and stated that there would be "no expense spared," such was clearly not the case. The \$160,000 budget was actually quite modest compared to budgets for some other Los Angeles-area theaters being built at the same time. For example, a two-story reinforced concrete theater designed for Venice listed a budget of \$400,000, and another theater-and-shops complex ready to begin construction near Culver City listed \$200,000. A Hollywood Boulevard project estimated \$500,000 for its theater building [Southwest Builder and Contractor 1929]. Money-saving shortcuts were evident in the construction of the Whittier Theatre. The tile "roof" was merely an ornamental border, the rear of the building was remarkably plain and utilitarian, and there were many large surfaces of exposed, unplastered concrete, both inside and out.

2. Condition of fabric: The entire complex had been deteriorating since the late 1960s. A 1977 Historic Resources Inventory, conducted for the California State Department of Parks and Recreation, described the building as only in "fair" condition and noted that it had been "altered." By 1986, the cloud machine apparatus that projected the atmospheric effects on the auditorium ceiling had not been working for several years, and many of the ceiling stars had disappeared [Whittier Daily News November 13, 1986].

The theater and store buildings sustained major damage in the October 1, 1987, Whittier Narrows earthquake. The structure was posted as unsafe for occupancy immediately thereafter. The neon marquee was taken down, windows and doors were boarded up, and a locked chain-link fence was erected around the perimeter. A demolition permit was issued in November 1987, and a wrecking crew worked on the site for a portion of a day, knocking "a large hole in the eastern wall of [the eastern] wing of the building. Another hole enlarged [the passageway under] a rear exit archway" [Whittier Daily News November 19, 1987].

Because of the fragile and unstable condition of the building, the HABS research and photographic team had no access to the tower or subterranean areas. Moreover, because there was no electricity, lights had to be attached to a

portable generator and moved about the space. Considerable rubble was strewn about, and some rooms were actually completely destroyed. It was therefore not possible to make the usual detailed comparisons with Bushnell's original plans or any of the proposed subsequent alterations.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The main theater building was a long rectangle flanked by two wings forming a courtyard. The eastern wing was the smaller of the two. It was trapezoidal in shape, with the south end attached directly to and extending across most of the front of the theater. An octagonal tower stood at the northwest corner of the theater building and connected to an arched passageway attached to the larger, western wing. This wing was roughly rectangular in shape, with a somewhat rounded facade curving around from Whittier Boulevard to Gretna Avenue. The inner courtyard was basically a squared-off "U" shape, with straight walls angling slightly outward toward Whittier Boulevard. The portion of the courtyard closest to the theater was covered by the projecting balcony of the second story, and the tower loomed overhead.

There were a total of twenty archways or bays around the north, east, and west facades: The east wing had a single archway facing Whittier Boulevard and three facing the inner court. The theater had a single large arch over the entrance to the foyer. The arched passageway led from the courtyard to the rear of the buildings. The west wing had five archways facing the inner court, and nine wrapping around from Whittier Boulevard down Gretna Avenue. The wings were one-story structures. The theater auditorium had a second-floor gallery for the projection room and balcony, as well as the offices in the tower. The rooflines of the theater auditorium and stage flies rose even higher, and the multi-level tower was the tallest structure on the site.

The theater was 76'4" wide and 160'1" long. The west wing was 35' wide at the street, widening to 49' where it adjoined the theater building. It was 75'8" from front to back. The tower was 17' in diameter at the base, tapering to 10' in diameter at the top of the column; the tower was 72' high from base to roof peak. The arched passageway was 16' wide and 63' long. The west wing was 75'9" across at its widest (mid-point),

and 47'2" across at its narrowest (rear) point. The wing was 139' from front to back.

2. Foundations: Concrete foundation walls, footings, and columns supported the entire building complex. With a few exceptions, plans noted that all footings and foundation walls were to be not less than 2' below natural grade. In the east and west wings, concrete foundation walls formed the perimeter with footings and columns supporting the archways. Foundation walls were 8" to 12" thick, with 2' by 2' footings. In the theater building, the auditorium was delineated by concrete foundation walls ranging from 8" to 24" in thickness, with footings for columns at regular intervals. Footings varied from 2' by 2' to approximately 4'5" by 4'5". Some fill was added under the foyer and at the rear of the auditorium to achieve the proper raked angle for line-of-sight to the screen and stage; fill was also placed under some portions of the stage floor.

3. Walls: The entire building complex appears to have been built of reinforced concrete walls. Most of the wall surfaces were plain, unplastered and unstuccoed. Only the Whittier Boulevard and Gretna Avenue facades were stuccoed and ornamented. Decorative elements included pilasters at the building's corners; tiled niches between the arches; a tile dado running completely around the courtyard; artstone grilles over the small attic and archway vents; elaborate artstone frames for the movie poster showcases near the box office; ornamental ironwork grilles covering the circular windows in the theater facade and the semicircular transoms over the store doors and windows; ironwork railings on the tower's balconets; and a box office window featuring an iron grille and a marble shelf. The decorative tiles were of two types: shiny, plain-colored ceramic squares, and thick, brick-like, low-fired tiles hand painted with an "X"-shaped pattern in black, green, yellow, and blue.

Some of these decorative elements were no longer extant at the time of this study. A photo of the inner courtyard and box office area suggests that the artstone poster frames had been replaced, that some of the artstone grilles were gone, and that the box office window was altered [Los Angeles Times September 29, 1988].

4. Structural systems, framing: The east and west wings were designed to have concrete floors and interior stud wall partitions. Summerbell trusses were specified for the roof framing. The theater auditorium was built with concrete slabs, on which were mounted the wooden risers for the rows of theater seats. Steel trusses spanned the width of the auditorium, and "Pacific Steel roof joists or equivalent" were specified in Bushnell's plans. The lower half of the tower had concrete walls; cross-braced metal lath was used for the upper portion. Wooden joists supported the four wooden tongue-and-groove tower floors above the cement ground floor.

5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The theater's exterior balcony was a tile-roofed porch with exposed redwood beams overhead and redwood posts and railing. The floor was reinforced concrete. The floor's underside, visible from the courtyard patio below, was plastered. Concrete corbels supported the balcony.

6. Stairways, ramps: Adjacent to the arched passageway between the theater and the west wing was a tiled reinforced cement staircase leading up to the office above the passageway. The stair treads were quarry tile; the risers were decorated Spanish tiles. The stairway had a single ornamental ironwork railing. Plain concrete steps, landings, and ramps were located outside the theater auditorium's exits. Concrete stairs led up to stage doors on the west and south sides of the auditorium.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: Principal doors included the main entrances for the east and west wings. These were double doors with plate glass windows and an upper band of nine lites. These doors were also flanked by plate glass windows to fill in the wide arched doorway. The theater's three principal doors were grouped under a large archway. They were of batten construction, with oak veneer in diamond and sunburst patterns. Both balcony doors (one single, one double) were rectangular with glass lites. Auditorium exits had double paneled hollow metal doors.

b. Windows: Principal windows included the three nine-lite balcony windows. Three round

window openings pierced the stucco wall of the theater building above the roofline of the east wing. The tower had three arched window openings, screened in with wire mesh, stair-stepping down the front three walls of the tower's eight sides. Eight tall, narrow arches, also screened with wire mesh, ringed the top of the tower, just below the roof.

In the east wing, there were two arched plate glass windows with three-lite semicircular transoms. The west wing appears to have had one similar window on the patio, but the plans do not seem to have called for windows on the Gretna Avenue side, except for the semicircular transoms in the archways. This arrangement seems unlikely, however, considering the fact that the building was occupied by several commercial businesses who would have wished to display their wares. These openings were boarded up at the time of this study. The rear of the west wing had four rectangular windows of six lites (four-lite awnings over two). Two six-lite windows were in the south wall above the roofline overhang. The office over the passageway had five-lite casement windows in the north and south walls at least.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: All roofs were flat-topped, hipped decks. The hipped portions were covered with curved mission tiles only across the Whittier Boulevard and Gretna Avenue facades. The flat portions were covered with composition roofing, except for the area over the auditorium stage which had composition roofing over a concrete slab.

b. Eaves: Twenty-four-inch galvanized iron gutters, 10" x 10" and 12" x 12" drainboxes and 3" x 3" or 4" x 4" downspouts formed the roof gutter system.

c. Tower: A single octagonal tower 72' high stood at the northwest corner of the theater building. Stuccoed cement walls formed the lower half; stuccoed metal lath was used for the upper portion. Stuccoed wing walls, with an elaborate angular profile, buttressed the tower on two sites. The tower tapered from 17' in diameter to 10' in diameter and was capped with an octagonal conical roof of

mission tiles. Bushnell evidently intended for the tower to be topped with a spire or large lighted globe. Eight smaller lights, one on each wall of the tower, circled just under the roofline and above the narrow arched window openings. The vertical sign "Whittier Theatre" was attached with struts by 1940.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. Basement: As originally designed, the basement, more than any other part of the theater, revealed the transitional era in which the Whittier Theatre was built. Below the wide and deep wooden stage, the basement housed not only the heating and ventilation equipment but five dressing rooms (including one large one for the use of "the chorus") and two bathrooms. Plans drawn up by the B.F. Shearer Company in 1947 do not show these stage-related facilities, but they do plot the locations of the various furnaces, vents, fans, motors, dampers, air washers, pump, filters, deflectors, fresh air intakes and air return points, noting that the "present furnaces and vent" and "present fan and motor" were to be relocated and reused.

b. First floor: The single-story east wing was designed by Bushnell to be a cafe restaurant. City directories show that it first opened as the McNees Cafe; in 1937 or 1938 it became the O.W. Hinegardner Restaurant, which lasted for a year or two. The updated 1937 Sanborn map labels the east wing "restaurant." In 1939, the Betty Matthews Dress Shop began its thirty-year tenancy. One photo, c. late 1940s-early 1950s, shows the facade of the dress shop with its sign facing Whittier Boulevard.

Bushnell's drawings are the only known depiction of the east wing floorplan. No interior views have been located. Bushnell's plans depict a simple, open space, with restrooms at the rear of the cafe, adjoining the restrooms (also inside the footprint of the east wing) that opened onto the theater foyer.

The single-story west wing was designed to house three stores and was known as the "market building." Store 1, in the northeast corner, was roughly 30' x 40'; stud walls separated it from Stores 2 and 3. Store 2 was quite small, roughly 20' square, opening onto the courtyard patio with a glass partition on one side to separate it from Store 3. Store 3 was much larger and irregular in shape, with restrooms and storage rooms toward the rear. City directories show that pharmacies were on site in the west wing from 1929 until at least 1973. The 1937 Sanborn map indicated that the drugstore occupied Store 1. It expanded in 1948 or 1949 into Store 2, which had previously been tenanted by a congeries of businesses including a women's clothing store, a dry cleaners, tile contractor and beauty salons. After the Whittier Drug Store expanded, this area may have been used successively by a post office substation, a watch repairman, and a photo supply and tobacco shop. Store 3 also got off to a shaky start. The list of tenants included a golf shop, florist, liquor store, drapery studio and tile contractor before settling, c. 1940, into a furniture store. No interior views or subsequent floorplans are known for this wing.

The ground floor of the theater building included a narrow foyer (only 17'4" wide at its narrowest) entered by way of the courtyard. Bathrooms were located at the northeast corner of the foyer. Doors in the curved rear auditorium wall led to the theater seats. The auditorium had three long blocks of seats separated longitudinally by two aisles, with side aisles along the auditorium walls as well. The deep stage extended out on an apron beyond the proscenium arch, and a narrow crescent-shaped orchestra pit lay between the stage footlights and the first row of seats. The ground floor of the tower contained the box office and two other small offices, separated by stud walls.

c. Second floor: the theater's balcony was directly above the foyer. Its principal function was to house the projection booth, and associated work rooms were secondary. Small cubicles labeled "generator room" and "battery room" were on either side, and the entire projection booth area was flanked by a

large "work room" and an "observation room." There were no indications of theater seating for movie patrons. A door off a small hallway led onto the exterior balcony overlooking the courtyard. The second floor of the tower housed a larger office, used by the theater manager. The second-floor office above the arched passageway at the rear of the courtyard was used initially by architect David S. Bushnell. According to city directories, it was also used until about 1934 by the building contractor, Wheatland Construction Company. The office was then vacant until about 1940. It was then listed briefly with the name Mrs. Nora Davis, and then was no longer listed as a separate address. Presumably, it continued in use as a theater office.

Most of the 1947 S. Charles Lee and B.F. Shearer Company plans involved alternatives for the proposed construction of an auditorium balcony for additional theater seating, plus the construction of restrooms in space taken over from the tower or the exterior balcony. This interior balcony was never built. Additional seating seems to have been obtained by removing the proscenium arch and placing chairs at the front of the auditorium.

d. Third floor, etc.: the octagonal tower had three additional floors above the second-floor office, but they were not designed to be occupied.

2. Stairways: No interior stairs are indicated in the east (cafe) building. A short flight of eight steps, with a single handrail, led down from the courtyard into Shop 3 of the west (market) building. Inside the tower, a curving staircase led from the foyer to the balcony and projection booth area. Above the second-floor tower office, metal ladders zigzagged through the wood and metal lath portion of the tower to the roof. Stairs led down to the basement dressing rooms from both sides of the stage. Metal ladders led to the "organ loft," presumably concealed in the hacienda-like structures along the auditorium side walls.

3. Flooring: Plans do not specify any type of covering for the cement and concrete floors of the east and west wing, though presumably some durable material such as linoleum tiles would have been selected. At the time of this study, the theater

foyer was carpeted with a low-napped, orange patterned industrial grade carpet. Certainly the theater was recarpeted more than once during its sixty years of activity. The east stairs to the outside balcony at the time of the study were carpeted in a green, burnt orange, and white Art Deco leaf pattern, which may have represented a portion of the original, or at least early floor covering. Bushnell's plans, however, called only for a cement floor. The theater and stage floors were wooden. The aisles were concrete, and carpeted as well. No documentation exists for floor coverings in the offices or on the interior balcony.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The east and west wings, except for the storage areas, appear to have had plastered interior walls and ceilings. Bushnell's plans specifically state that the foyer walls and ceiling were not to be plastered. The auditorium's side walls and proscenium were covered with the elaborate stucco-tile-plaster hacienda decorations. The rear wall of the auditorium had a plaster wainscot and cap, with unplastered concrete walls under the balcony overhang. The front wall of the projection booth balcony and the entire coved auditorium ceiling were coated with acoustical plaster.

An undated (c. 1947) drawing includes plans and elevations for the foyer. The drawings provide many details, but it is not known whether the proposed changes were carried out. The plans called for the foyer to be encircled with red birch paneling, with birch valances over the draped doorways leading to the theater auditorium. The upper walls were to be painted "fawn brown," and a "mural" is indicated on the south wall of the foyer, above the proposed snack bar. On study, the foyer walls were indeed found to be paneled and painted brown, but there was no evidence of a mural on the south wall and the existing snack bar lay along the north wall.

The plans also specify carpeting for the foyer floor, except for a 32" x 36" section of asphalt tile around the water fountain against the north wall of the foyer. The latter area was not found to be extant.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: Bushnell's door and window schedule (Sheet 11) does not provide details of the appearance of interior doors

for either the east or west wing. A single wire-mesh paneled door, leading from Store 2 to Store 3, and simple rectangular doors to restrooms seem to constitute all the interior doors in the west wing. Restroom doors were the only interior doors indicated for the east wing. The interior faces of the theater foyer's three arched entrance doors were simple batten construction, as were the narrower arched doors to the foyer restrooms and the tower offices. Four arched doorways led into the theater auditorium. The basement also had a counterweighted self-closing, metal-covered fire door, with track and hangers. A horizontal trap door led from the basement to the wings, stage left.

b. Windows: There were no interior windows in the east wing. A glass partition separated Store 2 from Store 3 in the west wing, and windows flanked the interior door of Store 2 as well. A skylight is indicated for the small restroom in the southwest corner of Store 1. In the theater, the projection booth wall was pierced by eight small square or rectangular openings for the projectors. Other openings in the rear auditorium wall included one in the work room and two in the observation room, on either side of the projection booth.

6. Decorative features and trim: The foyer had its Spanish vase- and-tile water fountain, and metal and glass hanging lamps (the latter are not indicated on the plans, but they were still extant). The interior side walls and proscenium arch of the theater were the focal points for interior ornamentation. The walls were designed to suggest the inner patio of a hacienda, replete with balconies; tile roof overhangs; towers and oriel-like turrets and "chimneys"; artstone window grilles; plastered and stuccoed corbels, arched doors, and pilasters; and extensive use of vari-colored stucco blocks and decorative Spanish tile to form a high dado. The proscenium arch was an extremely elaborate, almost churrigueresque montage of plasterwork ornament and tile. The inner border of the arch was fringed with dagged plasterwork, something like a vergeboard. Two rows of decorative tile formed the front edge of the arch, and the entire face of the proscenium arch was covered with a diagonal grid of diamond-shaped, bas-relief plaster ornaments. A frieze of decorative plasterwork ran across the

top of the arch. The springline of the arch was supported by two twisted plaster columns, flanked by vertical bands of tiles. The convex walls of two large towers, one on each side of the stage, had a large arched opening; each tower was topped with a crenelated roof ornament. The orchestra pit railing was covered with fabric plush, and cord rails were mounted near the steps on either side of the stage.

The proscenium arch and flanking towers seem to have been removed (c. 1947) in the interests of adding more seating at the front of the auditorium. A 1986 photo (Whittier Daily News November 13, 1986) shows the movie screen with at least two sets of curtains, but there is no indication of the arch. Instead, a looped drapery valance runs across the top of the screen.

The undated (1947?) plans for the foyer proposed a built-in snack bar on the south wall of the foyer, complete with a "Coca-Cola cooler," popcorn machine, and glass display shelves for candy. The snack bar was to be a rectangle with rounded outer corners with a "brass edge strip." Movie poster showcases were depicted near the foyer's east exit. A new replacement snack bar was subsequently installed on the north wall of the foyer, east of the entry doors. It was still extant at the time of this study.

No details are known about any interior ornamentation of the east or west wings.

7. Hardware: Door and window latch hardware is not specified in Bushnell's plans, but the auditorium's hacienda walls and proscenium towers were ornamented with iron grilles and railings, and the plasterwork arched "doors" had large iron hinges. Iron wall brackets are also depicted in Bushnell's elevations (Sheets 5 and 9). The foyer's metal and glass hanging lamps still were extant.

8. Mechanical equipment:

a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation:
For the east and west wings, overhead electric fans, placed inside above the doorways, seem to have supplied air-conditioning and assisted with ventilation. There are no indications of a heating system. The west end of the basement under the stage housed the theater's HVAC system's equipment, which included four Payne furnaces with associated ducts, air

washers, fan and motors. Vents reached each of the dressing rooms and basement restrooms. In the auditorium, large galvanized iron air ducts on the side walls led to four 42"-diameter ventilators on the roof. A 42" ventilator vented the attic space, and a 54" ventilator was directly above the centerline of the auditorium, in front of the projection room. Half a dozen 18" globe ventilators were depicted over the projection room area, and the foyer had two 24"-diameter vents in the east wall above the exit.

In March 1947 the B.F. Shearer Company drew up plans for revamping the theater's HAV system, including the proposed addition of from four to six anemostats and their ductwork above the auditorium ceiling. This work was apparently carried out, as circular ceiling vents similar to those shown on the plans were extant. Plans also called for the installation of exhaust fans to supplement the gravity vents in the foyer restrooms, and anemostats for the foyer ceiling.

b. Lighting: For the east and west wings, overhead grids of 200W light fixtures supplemented window illumination. The theater foyer was lighted with hanging lamps. The auditorium's lighting was a major part of its special attraction for movie-goers, as it included atmospheric effects simulating sunset and moving clouds, projected on the vast coved ceiling. The ceiling was also studded with numerous small lights to simulate stars, though none of the details of this lighting apparatus are shown on Bushnell's plans.

c. Plumbing: Plumbing for the east wing (and for the adjacent theater foyer's restrooms and drinking fountain) seems to have been run through the east wall. For the west wing, water and sewer lines must have run east-west along the line of the partition wall separating Stores 1 and 2 to service drinking fountains, wash basins, and toilets. A second line must have serviced the rear restrooms.

9. Original furnishings: Three items in this category are mentioned in Bushnell's plans. One, the stage curtains, are neither depicted nor described; Bushnell merely indicates the "curtain slot" on either side of the proscenium arch. He does illustrate his idea for a drinking fountain

against the north wall of the foyer. The fixture was to be mounted in a large, olla-shaped "glazed decorated Spanish vase," placed on a raised platform of decorative tiles. In his elevation for the rear wall of the theater auditorium, Bushnell delineates three large rectangular moldings "for tapestry frame," suggesting that some kind of decorative textiles were hung on the concrete wall between the arched doorways leading to the foyer.

The undated (c. 1947) plans for the foyer renovation show a mirror 4' wide and 6' high to be installed on the north wall (where Bushnell's fountain was placed); this plan shows a drinking fountain farther down the wall, between the restroom doors.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The front of the Whittier Theatre faced northeast (though references throughout this report refer to the front facade as the north facade), and was parallel to Whittier Boulevard, running east-west. Gretna intersects Whittier Boulevard running north-northeast-south-southwest. The Whittier Theatre complex was developed just outside the city limits of Whittier on the property of the McNees Ranch, portions of which still existed at least into the 1980s. A large portion of the ranch, the McNees Park Tract, was already being developed in late 1928. A Whittier Daily News article dated November 16, 1928 described it as "one of the finest subdivisions of its kind, located in the fastest growing section of the East Side." Sanborn map coverage for the area in 1937 shows the theater, still outside city limits, set amidst a growing residential neighborhood, with a commercial strip developing down Whittier Boulevard. The 1940 aerial photograph shows this combination even more vividly, as well as large tracts of orchards and fields nearby. By the 1950s, Whittier Boulevard was a well established commercial artery, and the region was definitely suburban in character.

2. Historic landscape design: Bushnell's plans called for very little in the way of landscaping. The courtyard patio was originally designed to have a central fountain set in the intersection of four small grass plots. The fountain was built, but the c. 1940 aerial suggests that something like the colored squares of pavement that were extant had been substituted for the lawn areas.

Whittier Boulevard ran across the north face of the building, and the east and south sides were pavement, some of which was used for parking by theater patrons. Though not part of the building complex itself, the small triangular McNeese Park, just across Gretna Avenue to the west, was a visual asset to the theater site and helped soften the lines of the building's bulky mass. The park was laid out as the theater was being built, and its lawns and mature shade trees are still extant.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: The Whittier Museum, 6755 Newlin Avenue, Whittier, CA 90601, has in its archival collections a print of David S. Bushnell's original 1928 color rendering of the Whittier Theatre complex. The main repository of architectural drawings, however, is the headquarters of Pacific Theaters, (120 N. Robertson Blvd., Los Angeles), which has the original 1928 blueprints and elevations by David S. Bushnell, and the 1947 plans of S. Charles Lee, the B.F. Shearer Company, and R.L. Warren. The collection also includes B.F. Shearer Company's 1959 plans, as well as several unidentified sheets dated c.1947 and c.1970s.
- B. Early views: The earliest views are photocopies of two aerial photographs taken shortly after the building's completion (nearby McNeese Park is merely a triangle of dirt). The originals were unavailable to the research team, but the copies were on file in the offices of Doerken Properties. Surprisingly few photographs of the Whittier Theatre are to be found in the collections of the Whittier Museum. A later aerial, c. 1940, offers a fairly detailed view of the complex and its courtyard. Another aerial photograph, dated 1940, was taken from higher altitude and shows the Whittier Theatre in its semi-suburban, semi-rural setting. A black-and-white picture postcard view, taken by local photographer Barton's Studio in the late 1940s or early 1950s, shows the theater in its prime, though modified by the addition of the broad neon marquee spanning the courtyard along Whittier Boulevard. This photograph also shows the two commercial anchors: the Betty Matthews Dress Shop in the east wing (on site from 1939 to 1969), and the Whittier Drug Store in the west wing (a pharmacy occupied the site from the beginning until the early 1970s). The original postcard is in the collections of the Whittier Museum and was published in Valdez 1987.

C. Bibliography

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14. California State Department of Parks and Recreation, Historic Resources Inventory, "Whittier Theater," 1977.
 15. Whittier Daily News, November 13, 1986.
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 17. Los Angeles Times, September 29, 1988.
- D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: One potentially rich source of documentary information not made available to the HABS research team is the collection discussed by Tom Paradiso (of the California Society of Theater Historians) in a December 9, 1986, Whittier Daily News article. Paradiso stated that he had information about the theater's history. Further research in the Whittier Museum might yield additional information about some of the tenants of the east and west wings. Los Angeles-area building and architectural trade journals might be examined for details on proposed renovations, designers, contractors, and the like. Local film archives might also yield additional documentation.
- E. Supplemental materials:
1. The Southwest Builder and Contractor entry for January 4, 1929, p. 42, column I reads: "Theatre and stores, 1 story, reinforced concrete, Whittier; Whittier Amusement Co., owner; Dora Bushnell [sic], Whittier, designer; E. M. Wheatland, Whittier, contractor; excavating. \$160,000"
 2. The Southwest Building and Contractor entry for January 4, 1929, p. 58, column 1, reads: "CLASS A THEATER (Whittier)- E. M. Wheatland, Whittier Blvd. (Whittier 415-309), Whittier will build a large class A theater, store and market building, at the corner of Whittier Blvd. and Hadley, Whittier, for the Whittier Amusement Co. The theater will have a seating capacity of 1000 with balcony and there will also be a large market, drug store and cafe. Plans were prepared by Dave Bushnell.... [portion of copy missing] metal store fronts, Spanish tile work, art stone trim, plaster exterior, steel sash, tile and marble work, cement and wood floors, gas furnace and blower system of heating and ventilating, toilets, etc: \$160,000. Work will be started on

January 2nd."

3. The Whittier Daily News, August 1, 1929.
Front page article describing the Whittier
Theatre's opening night is appended in photocopy
at the end of this report

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The project of recording the Whittier Theatre through preparation of documentation meeting the standards of HABS is mitigative. It was required by the City of Whittier of the current owner, Doerken Properties, in advance of Doerken receiving approval to develop the site. Doerken Properties hired the consulting firm of PHR Environmental Consultants, Inc., of Santa Barbara to undertake the project. PHR commenced its work on February 6, 1990. Shelley Bookspan, Ph.D., president of the firm, supervised the project and prepared the final report. Everett Weinreb, an independent photographer with considerable HABS and HAER experience, subcontracted with PHR to undertake the photographic portion of the project. Likewise, Paula Carr, M.A., a free-lance historian and cultural resource specialist, subcontracted with PHR to conduct the historical research and to prepare the draft report. The photographs were taken on February 6, February 19, and March 11, 1990. The research was conducted and the report prepared in February and March 1990.

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Consultants, Inc.
Date: March 26, 1990